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ABSTRACT

Mary Louise Pratt's reading of "contact zone," which she defines as "those social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power," enables an instructor to think in terms of naming and autoethnography. The "contact zone" has become a way to map the terrain of the writing classroom. Pratt asks readers, both instructors and students, to see how writers creolize the dominant discourse with their own language and literacies, and she asks that they value those languages and literacies. She asks them to recognize the ways those multi-voiced texts "mean." She foregrounds the problematics of binary positioning, of either/or patterns for thinking/writing. She points out the positivistic readings that have diminished texts in the past, and disallows those sorts of reductivist readings. In an elementary composition course, the "contact zone" has reshaped the way that student stories are read by the instructor. When one student wrote a "Gilligan's Island"-type story in which the "I" encountered "natural" people on an island, and after wowing them with a flashlight, left with some contempt for their naivete, the student was asked to rewrite the story to account for the instructor's own discomfort with the stereotypes it employed. In another example of an in-class exercise in a literature class, Toni Morrison's "Beloved" is used as a vehicle for making students more aware of issues concerning "contact zone." (TB)

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Crying Wolff! Risking "Pratt-falls," and Contact Zone

"Crying Wolff" has that lexical ambiguity that I always seem to work toward and enjoy when I achieve it. Does "crying" function as adjective or verb, or does the epithet allude to that childhood story, "The Boy Who Cried Wolf"? Is the name consistent with the person? Does the name constitute the subjectivity? Does the name spoken by others construct identity? Does the "naming negate the object that it appears to preserve?" (Culler, "Lace, Lance, and Pair" 8)

Last semester, I happened to be in our library, close to the circulation desk, when I overheard one of my students asking for the dialogic journals that students were collaborating on, writing responses in them in order to create a conversation about the literature under discussion (I realize that these conversations should be on-line, but Saginaw Valley State University is not there yet with its technology.) In any case, the student approached the counter and said, "I'm crying Wolff again," and emitted a howl. The attendant laughed and nodded as though he knew the drill, and retrieved the proper group journal for the student.

That moment taught me a lot about the student's vision of me, of the assignment, and of the library attendant's complicity in the naming process. It also brought home to me the variousness of "contact zone." I always seem to be in it. "Crying Wolff" became the site for constructing me in spaces beyond the classroom; it was Althusserian in the way it interpellated me, called out to me, hailed me. Students had a need to pun on the name, and in that way they became engaged in the contact zone affinity for naming those in authority, for deferring my power.

"Crying Wolff" is pun and no pun. It's my professional designation and my signature. I'm invested in the name. Yes, so students play; students always have. They've invented identities for us. They have their own fictions of who we are, and in many ways we perpetuate those fictions. They constitute us as professionals, and in that way keep us at arm's length. They come to the library, "Cry Wolff," and fill journal pages with parody; students consider me, interestingly, the metropolitan type, themselves the locals, and somehow, together we must travel those linguistic spaces. It surprises my students when I tell them that I have never lived anywhere with

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sidewalks...

Mary Louise Pratt has energized my practice and my professional life. She has allowed me to map her account of colonial and post-colonial discourses onto the spaces of the classroom and the profession. Let me order my following remarks in three ways: let me risk taking a "Pratt-fall" by telling some of the theoretical moves of "contact zone" pedagogies; second, let me illustrate some of the implications that Contact Zone has for writing instruction; and third, let me show how those moves play out in readings of Morrison's Beloved and Louise Erdrich's Tracks.

Pratt's reading of ***contact zone****--"those social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly assymetrical relations of power" (34)--enables my analysis of a moment like "crying Wolff"; and it allows me to think in terms of naming and autoethnography. My students have turned the tables on me, have written/spoken "autoethnographic texts [which] are representations that the so-defined others construct* ***in response to*** *or in dialogue with those texts" (35).*

Contact zone has become a way to map the terrain of the writing classroom. When I may think that I've designed a classroom that fosters community, a heterogeneous, multi-vocal classroom, "zone" can become evident. Now and then, even where I imagine community, students can become "zoned out," tired of the "full intellectual process" of writing and reading.

The question is? How does reading Pratt and contact zone theory change our practice? I think that reading Pratt has a similar effect to reading Mina Shaughnessy. Both have had discipline-wide effects; both have affected writing teachers in profound ways. Shaughnessy asked teachers to read for patterns of error and for text that tries to account for academic discourses. Pratt asks that we read differently--to see how writers creolize the dominant discourse with their own languages and literacies, and she asks that we value those languages and literacies. She asks us to recognize the ways those multi-voiced texts mean. Pratt foregrounds the problematics of binary positioning, of either/or patterns for thinking/writing. She points out the positivistic readings that have diminished texts in the past, and disallows those sorts of reductivist readings. Pratt and Contact Zone theory make ideology always already present in readers and in writers. She asks that we read student text as something more and something different from "student writing"; she asks that we recognize it as a hybridized language, a "zone."

Mary Pratt knows the ideological ground is shifting in education, and more particularly, in composition studies, in languages and literatures (or in those blended lit/comp courses--I have read Tate and Lindemann...). For her, and for her courses, the formal lecture becomes "anomalous" in the contact zone classroom; student voices and texts are enjoined. There's even the implication that local departments might employ contact zone as Patricia Bizzell suggests, as an organizing principle for curriculum review.

If as Pratt tells us, contact zone includes "exercises in storytelling and identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms); the redemption of the oral...ways to move ***into and out of*** *theoretics of authenticity..."; ways to communicate across lines of difference and hierarchy... (40), then these are practices adaptable to the classroom. Students can engage in those storytelling practices; they can undertake collaborative projects and theorize about elite and vernacular forms of writing, the material practices in the university. I think the tendency is to see classrooms with culturally diverse student bodies as the paradigmatic "contact zone," but groups that look like communities, homogeneous groups, can also be contact zone, can erupt into zone before one's eyes. Individuals can be the site of contact zone; the body can be the terrain where contact happens. Even discussions of literature, particular characters, can be zones.*

In my section of English 111, our university's first semester writing course, students have collaborated on stories, and I find that Contact Zone has reshaped the way that I am reading their stories. One partnership has written a sort of Gilligan's Island story, where a writer of no particular gender goes off on his or her yacht to a supposedly peaceful island paradise to commune with nature and write. I have seen the paper in various rounds of revision and I still am uncomfortable with it. After the boat veers off course, the author puts ashore where he or she finds a group of "natives" who are without orthographic writing, a la one of Fr. Ong's peoples innocent of writing or print culture. A flashlight serves as technology that mystifies and delights the natives and the writer is appalled at their naivete. After a relatively short visit, the "I" of the story leaves and is not apologetic about his hasty departure. I find that this Rousseauian reading of "natural" people distasteful and have asked that the students rewrite to account for my discomfort with their stereotypical telling of such an encounter. The most disturbing part of the story occurs at the end: "They [the indigenous people] also gave

me something. Something that I could never return to them. They gave me a best-selling novel. After this encounter, I had a great story to write." The writer has stolen something from the islanders--their story. It seems to me that Pratt warns us away from this appropriating move. Even as I write, I worry that I have made my students' paper my own sort of "novel."

Another pair of collaborators has written a story called "The Map." It too has a journey motif, this time the natural individual has been raised in the wilds of Montana, has a definite territory, but on one day, for no particular reason, the "I"--also not defined in any particular way, not named--has decided to venture over the mountain that has formed his boundary, the limits of his or her travel. Even though the mountain has hemmed him or her in previously, the character makes a trip to the other side, sees new natural sites, eventually finds his or her way to another being, a person who has come to the mountains for a respite from the busier world outside. The two meet and exchange maps and pledge to become sociable.

Even as I describe these two stories (and there were more--stories with a Lottery plot, everybody wins, stories with the marriage plot, everybody marries, stories with writing as the plot--not everybody writes) the theme of travel and maps or mismapping or negotiating with those from "other" places became very strong. Because of Pratt's work, I am reading these retellings of cultural myth in different ways. I am asking students to reread and revise their work with regard to those others and other discourses.

My literature classes, too, have a different spin, given Contact Zone perspective. I've written an essay called "Teaching in the Contact Zone: The Myth of Safe Houses" in which I undertake a three part analysis. First, the essay describes contact zone theory and its implications for teaching; then I use contact zone as a lens through which to read Toni Morrison's Beloved, and finally, I describe the zone as it played out in my classroom one day. I was drawing upon my reading of Sweet Home as a contact zone in which the literate (in the sense of print text) landholder, in the shape of Schoolteacher, records and controls the slave population; the ways in which the non-print characters know themselves through their representations in texts, deeds, newspapers, etc. And in my sorting out of print from non-print cultures, I mapped this sort of structure onto the classroom, taking Schoolteacher as my counterpart--though not willingly. Students extended the analogy, and resisted the binaries with vigor, as they should. They knew a reductivist reading of themselves when they felt it. No one "zoned out" on that day.

Louise Erdrich's Tracks is becoming another novel that will bear up under contact zone scrutiny. This semester my 301 students and I are reading it, and Writing Interpretive Papers. While the students and I have been travelers in the imaginary spaces provided by the novel, contact zone has informed our rereading. Briefly, Tracks enjoins two Native American voices--Nanapush's, the traditionalist, and Pauline's, the newly constructed Christian martyr--in order to tell the early twentieth century story of a kinship group who, through deception, lose their allotments from the U. S. government. Erdrich's text creates the site for the autoethnography that Pratt suggests: Euro-American culture and the Native American land are defined by the documents, the maps, the surveys, the newspapers that Nanapush reads, the deeds, the church liturgy that Father Damien supplies, while the oral culture, the indigenous peoples, the Chippewa, the pre-history meet and clash and invent new languages, new ways of speaking. In the novel, the "peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict....usually in the context of trade" (Imperial Eyes 6). The characters are constituted by their relation to one another and by the cranberry bark that the family can collect and convert to cash. When Pratt enumerates all the possibilities for the contact zone--"oral texts, written texts, lost texts, secret texts, texts appropriated, abridged, translated, anthologized, and plagiarized; letters, reports, survival tales, civic description, navigational narrative, monsters and marvels, medicinal treatises, academic polemics, old myths replayed and reversed (Imperial Eyes 23)--she is referring to the 18th century La Condamine expedition. I hear her speaking instead to the stories contained in Tracks. And it strikes me that this litany of texts produced in the contact zone might become genres that could inform many of our classes, that could reshape curriculum in profound ways. We can ill afford to miss what Mary Louise Pratt is saying about Contact zone and its implications for pedagogy and for our profession. It's good work, energizing work, work that defines us as professionals rather than anti-professionals, the very tight spot, the zone that Michael Berube tells us we have created for ourselves.

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